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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [PE](#)
SUBJECT: OPERATION EXCELLENCE: MILITARY ATTACKS SHINING
PATH IN THE VRAE

REF: A. LIMA 1678
[1](#)B. LIMA 1640

Classified By: Amb. P Michael McKinley for reasons 1.4b and d.

[1](#)1. (C) Summary and Introduction: The Peruvian military between August and October 2008 implemented "Operation Excellence 777" to take control of a historic Shining Path stronghold located in an area called Vizcatan in the Apurimac and Ene River Valley (VRAE). The Vizcatan area's critical importance to the Shining Path lies in its particularly harsh and impenetrable terrain, and the rapid mobility provided by the Mantaro River. During the six-week operation, the military fought several pitched battles with the Shining Path and successfully dislodged them from their Vizcatan camps, and continues the fight to consolidate control over the zone. Military leaders publicly proclaimed Operation Excellence to be a clear-cut success, while several officers and prominent analysts criticized the operation as insufficient.

[1](#)2. (C) Notwithstanding the operation's failings, its significance lies more in the decision by the senior command, the Minister of Defense, and the Presidency to continue and broaden the campaign against Shining Path in the VRAE. This is a first in over ten years of inconclusive assaults on Sendero in a region that produces half the country's coca leaf. The new Minister of Interior is also committed to integrating the police more directly in the VRAE. While it is too early to gauge likely success, a major tactical and strategic shift is clearly underway. Two subsequent cables will report on ongoing challenges to the GOP's success, including corruption. End Summary and Introduction.

History and Significance of the Vizcatan Area

[1](#)3. (C) The Peruvian military between August and October 2008 implemented Operation Excellence 777 to take control of a key Shining Path stronghold located in an area called Vizcatan in the Apurimac and Ene River Valley (VRAE). Vizcatan has been a critical Shining Path refuge since 1984 when a senior Shining Path leader Oscar Ramirez Durand (aka "Feliciano") scouted the zone and established a safe haven for his forces. After the capture of Shining Path founder Abimael Guzman in 1992, Feliciano took control of the organization and, under escalating pressure from the government, retreated to the VRAE and ultimately to the Vizcatan before his capture in [1](#)1999.

[1](#)4. (C) The military never established a permanent presence in

Vizcatan, however, and Shining Path remnants quickly returned to the zone for refuge. Press reports document several occasions after 1999 when the guerrillas launched attacks in the VRAE and then retreated to Vizcatan, beyond the reach of security forces. By 2008, Vizcatan had reportedly become the main base of operations for the Shining Path's largest and most violent faction, which calls for the continuation of the revolution abandoned by other factions. The military estimates that faction's leader Victor Quispe Palomino (aka "Jose" or "Ivan") and his military chief Leonardo Huaman Zuniga (aka "Alipio") command about 250 guerrillas in the VRAE and count on hundreds of other supporters.

¶5. (C) Vizcatan's importance to the Shining Path lies in its particularly harsh and impenetrable terrain. Located on the Mantaro River on the northernmost fringe of Ayacucho Region, Vizcatan is a series of steep mountain peaks surrounded by valleys of thick jungle. This inhospitable geography has long provided the Shining Path remnants with natural defenses against government incursion, while the Mantaro River has given them a strategic mobility corridor north and west. River mobility has allowed the guerrillas to expand their area of operations into the neighboring regions of Junin and Huancavelica, and enabled them to retreat quickly when pressured by government forces.

Military Launches "Operation Excellence 777"

¶6. (C) Between August and October 2008, the Peruvian Joint Forces Command implemented Operation Excellence 777, the military's first effort to take control of Vizcatan since ¶1999. The military's goal was to set up a string of six

bases stretching east to west, several of which would be located on the sites of Sendero camps. The bases would be linked by troop patrols that radiated outwards and swept up Shining Path remnants fleeing from their camps. The military also hoped to capture or kill the Shining Path's top leaders in the area. To complete the mission, the military flew some 350 special forces troops by helicopter into the zone.

Mixed Results

¶7. (C) During the six-week operation, the military reportedly fought several pitched battles with the Shining Path and successfully dislodged them from their Vizcatan camps, scattering them to other parts of the region and reportedly disrupting their supply routes. Many analysts have underscored the significant strategic progress reflected in this incursion into the heart of Sendero territory by government security forces for the first time ever. The guerrillas killed three soldiers and wounded dozens in the fighting, according to various sources, while the army claims it killed up to twenty Shining Path. According to journalists who visited Vizcatan after operations ended, the military successfully established five bases manned by 350 troops, but was forced to withdraw from the sixth under sniper fire from the guerrillas. Video from the area shows that the bases are essentially small clearings in the jungle located on high ground with sparse barracks. Bases are supplied by about four helicopters (although two are reported damaged), which shuttle supplies and replacement troops to the zone from the military's VRAE headquarters in Pichari, a fifteen minute flight away. Both helicopters landing in the area as well as patrols sweeping the jungle have regularly faced crossfire from guerrilla sharpshooters that retreated from the initial military assault. Patrols also face booby-traps strewn throughout the jungle, and according to one visiting journalist can only advance about 100 meters per day.

Military Publicly Touts Success

¶8. (C) Military leaders have publicly proclaimed Operation Excellence to be a clear-cut success. In a January interview, Admiral Jose Aste Daffos -- who commanded the operation as head of Peru's Joint Command until December 2008 -- summarized the military's accomplishments by claiming they

had dislodged the Shining Path from its main "support base", which he said would be critical to the survival of any Maoist revolution. He said the military's principal achievement was to cut the Shining Path's key routes for acquiring logistical support and funds from narcotrafficking. He added that his intelligence reports said the military had killed 20 Shining Path and that many others were beginning to desert. He acknowledged, however, that many guerrillas remain in the zone -- thanks to their superior knowledge of the geography -- and are trying to retake the territory. But he dismissed continued Shining Path attacks as desperate acts that highlight Vizcatan's importance and underscore the military's strategic victory.

Some Officers Less Positive

¶9. (C) Prominent counter-drug analyst Jaime Antezana (protect) reported to Poloff that the newly installed commander in the VRAE, three-star General Ricardo Moncada Novoa, had confided to him privately that the Vizcatan operation has not been as successful as publicly portrayed. Moncada reportedly said that prior to the operation, word had somehow leaked to the Shining Path, who had evacuated their camps before the military even arrived. He admitted that the military does not control Vizcatan as a whole, but only the small areas where bases have been established. Moncada added that his troops do not know the zone as well as Shining Path and are a poor match for the enemy. He also criticized the strategy behind the operation, saying that while Vizcatan is important, the Shining Path controls various strategic points in the VRAE, and attacking one point has a limited overall impact.

¶10. (C) In a conversation with Poloff during a visit to the Pichari command base, a colonel involved in the operation echoed Moncada's comments, lamenting that the attack had

traded too many casualties for control over land of questionable strategic value. An airforce general in Pichari added that the lack of an airstrip on the base severely limits the command's ability to bring supplies into the VRAE and maintain operational tempo. One recently-retired general has even accused some military commanders of intentionally designing a losing strategy in the VRAE in order to avoid disrupting lucrative drug routes that indirectly benefit some senior army officials. (Note: See Septel for details on this general's theory. End Note.)

Analysts Critique Operation

¶11. (C) Several prominent analysts have provided the Embassy with an even more negative view. Former Interior Minister Fernando Rospigliosi dismissed the operation as a bad strategy that is costing the GOP money and lives while achieving nothing, not even a single dead guerrilla, despite the military's claims. The military cannot control Vizcatan with a few small bases, he said, and cannot even maintain these bases in such hostile territory, surrounded by enemies that know the land. Another counter-drug analyst agreed that Vizcatan has been strategically important for the guerrillas, but said there are numerous places in the VRAE with similar geography where they can now run. A security analyst operating in Ayacucho told Poloff that the main guerrilla force simply moved upriver to a province in Huancavelica, while others stayed behind to take easy potshots at the military's isolated forces. We also heard from the Regional President of neighboring Junin that many guerrillas have moved into his region to the provinces of Satipo and Concepcion.

Sendero Derides Excellence

¶12. (C) Meanwhile, Shining Path guerrillas have coffered at the operation in manifestos published on their website, and in adocument captured by security forces and passed to the Embassy. (Note: We cannot confirm the authenticity of the document. End Note) In the leaked document, the Shining Path claims that it killed 24 soldiers and wounded 48 (including

16 dead and 17 wounded in an attack outside Vizcatan, Ref B), captured 19 rifles, attacked helicopters seven times -- damaging four and destroying one -- all while suffering no casualties of their own. The document mocked the military's claims that it cut off terrorism and drug routes, calling the claims "amusing" given that "the VRAE itself has some 50 exits, and each exit, as you move away from it, branches off into at least two or three". The document did acknowledge that the government had attacked some key guerrilla strongholds, such as its base and rest center in the town of Bidon, but added that military had focused on "places without any territorial importance and in many places in empty space...". The document further derided the military's new Vizcatan bases as located "on unfavorable ground...in a vulnerable position of fixed targets, easily struck."

Comment: Operation an Important But Insufficient Step

113. (C) We are encouraged by the military's determination to strike at the heart of the Shining Path's historical refuge in Vizcatan and by their apparent resolve to maintain a presence in the zone. The military's intervention in a key enclave can only have a disruptive impact on the guerrilla effort. However, given the current level of committed resources and the Shining Path's mobility and adaptability, the medium to long-term impact of the operation remains in doubt. In an October attack, the Shining Path demonstrated it can still operate effectively outside Vizcatan, and guerrillas remaining inside the zone reportedly continue to harass government troops. The latest reported attacks occurred on February 20th, when twenty guerrillas attacked a Vizcatan base and injured one soldier, and in two separate incidents on February 27th, when guerrillas wounded two soldiers and killed one. The armed forces are now looking to reinforce in Vizcatan, improve patrolling, upgrade equipment, improve intelligence, and sustain through the year. Based on a series of recent high-level bilateral discussions, including the meeting between CJCS Mullen and President Garcia (septel), there may be a role for the U.S. in supporting GOP efforts to achieve this priority strategic

goal.
MCKINLEY